

On the Trail of

# 'HOLY JIM' SMITH:

## The Man Behind The Legend

**F**ATE TRIED TO CONCEAL him by naming him Smith. But this Smith was not a man to disappear into the oblivion of a common name. Someone once remarked that "A nickname is the hardest stone that the devil can throw at a man." James Smith's nickname created a legend in his own time and a mystery after he was gone, for in all of Orange County no piece of geography invites more speculation than does the place called *Holy Jim Canyon*.

About the man for whom it was named, no more in print exists than perhaps 200 words. When those words say that he was a bookkeeper and that he swore to perfection, they have said it all. Had it not been for this brief reference in Terry Stephenson's *Shadows of Old Saddleback*,



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local history might have lost even that. Unknown to Stephenson, as he was writing of this "long-gone" mountain character, *Holy Jim still lived*. The historian's oversight was excusable. Ask anyone who has ever tried to trace a missing "Smith."

But, as a prominent genealogist once stated, "Give me a middle initial, and I can run down Satan himself!" With this solid advice, I set out to do precisely that.

Reserving Jim Smith's tombstone dates for the moment, let me retrace the trail I followed to reach that all-important middle initial. As you know, it is difficult to recapture the life of a man who wrote nothing and about whom little was written. But Jim Smith was a talker - no ordinary talker, mind you, but a man given to blasphemous eloquence. As recollected by one mountain old-timer, "When Jim Smith started cussing, which was most of the time, he could peel paint off a stove pipe."



In a day and age when salty language was nothing unique, Smith must have been outstanding in his class for he earned the title of "Cussin' Jim." Several sources indicate that even this handle was preceded by that of "Greasy Jim," and another early bookkeeper (with the unbelievable name of Ed Honey) referred to him as "Lying Smith."

Time has an ironical way of mellowing matters, and when it became appropriate in 1900 to name the north tributary of Trabuco Creek, Government map-makers gave the honor to its most memorable citizen. The fact that it became "Holy Jim" always brought a solemn clearing of the throat from Gus Straw, who knew Jim as a "hard-rock infidel."

Ed Atkinson, who came with his parents into the Trabuco area in the 1880's, elaborated somewhat on Holy Jim's character:

"We know him as Greasy Jim, too," he recalled. "Old Jim was loud enough all right and very profane, even around women. Course, he never got mad, he just cussed a lot. All things considered, Jim was pretty even-natured."



One of the few visitors to the Santa Ana mountains in the late eighties to put pen to paper was W. H. Marquis. After  
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HOLY JIM SMITH AND HIS G.A.R. CRONIES  
No Shirt and an Eight-Inch Plug of Tobacco

## HOLY JIM SMITH The Man Behind The Legend

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a three-week visit in the "north fork of the Trabuco" with the crusty old beekeeper, Marquis wrote:

"Jim Smith was a rough diamond. Under his roughness beat a warm heart. A family of mountain quail scratched unafraid about the dooryard of the cabin, as tame as chickens. One day, when Jim was away, some wretch shot a number of them. Jim cursed for two days and I only heard him repeat himself twice. Jim was a great joker. A friend of his, F. D. Sheffer, lived about two miles below him. Jim told me one time that a strip of neutral ground lay between him and Sheffer and that he had forbidden Sheffer to set foot on it.

"Knowing Jim as I did, I cannot but consider it a slur on his memory to call that beautiful canyon 'Holy Jim Canyon.' To me it will always be just plain Jim Smith Canyon."



As suggested by the accompanying photographs, Jim wore the same floppy hat from one year to the next. He had a moustache like a walrus, and reports have it that while he was no drunkard, he bore a certain affection for his jug. Aside from this, and knowing the fullest intricacies of profanity, Jim's only other major indelicacy was the eight-inch plug of tobacco he used to carry around in his hip pocket.

Good men rarely change, and while Jim's chief trait was cursing, he seems not to have let it slide any when he finally retired from the hills just after the turn of the century. Witnesses claim that he was last seen in Santa Ana, still cursing, but pushing a baby buggy. Whose



### EL TORO IN THE 90's WAS A QUIET PLACE

— Until Cussin' Jim Smith Came to Town

child it was, no one remembers. However, they do remember distinctly that whenever anyone commented on how bright the baby was, Jim's tender comment was: "You gowdam right he's smart!"



Beginning in the 1870's, except for an occasional silver strike, the chief source of revenue in the Santa Ana mountains came from beekeeping. The man who first settled Trabuco Oaks, George Rowell, later extended his honey operations up Trabuco Canyon and built the original shack where the parent fig tree stands today in Holy Jim. Attracted by the nature of his enterprise, bears frequently gave Rowell a bad time. He killed one enormous brute after it had destroyed 22 colonies, then sold out to

Jeff Williams. Williams, in turn, sold his interests to two brothers named Martin, who subsequently sold to a Santa Ana man named James Smith about 1888.

Jim enlarged the house. Its loose rock foundation may still be seen just off the Holy Jim trail, a mile beyond the end of the road. He set out a small orchard which included several fig trees. A fig may not cost much, but it can produce a prodigious number of offspring as testified by the trees along Holy Jim and Trabuco creeks. Another mark left by Smith was a type of myrtle (*Vinca minor*) which has spread throughout the canyons.



After his hives began to produce, Jim brought his wife "Hat" to the canyon. No one remembers "Hat's" real name, but for people who heard Jim expound, she is forever immortalized.

El Toro was the shopping center for Trabuco's miners, beekeepers and ranchers in the nineties, and on alternate Saturdays Jim's buckboard was always there. Invariably he was surrounded by listeners, "Though there was no need to," Ed Adkinson noted, "because you could have heard him clear into the county seat (Santa Ana)." Certain ideas tickled Jim mightily, and one was the bane of his wife's existence. It concerned "Hat's bee drawers."

Jim went into the most intimate of de-

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HOLY JIM'S CANYON RESIDENCE  
On the Trail just Below the Fig Tree

## HOLY JIM SMITH The Man Behind The Legend

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tails describing the undergarments which his wife had contrived to keep out his honey bees. Every time he told the story he laughed so hard that the wrinkles ran out of his face. He would have to remove his little steel-rimmed glasses to wipe his eyes. In later years he discarded or lost the glasses. He also discarded wearing shirts, but maintained his walrus moustache and up-brimmed hat as long as anyone knew him.



While the office of County Bee Inspector seems of no great importance now, to mountain beemen in the 80's and 90's, it was a hotly contested position. J. E. "Judge" Pleasants of Santiago Canyon was running as was a man named Kimble. Adkinson described Kimble as "a dude with three initials who always smoked cigars and knew nothing whatsoever about bees."

Apparently Jim must have thought as much, because one day in front of the El Toro general store Adkinson asked Jim to sign Judge Pleasants' petition.

"You gawdam right I'll sign her!" exploded Smith. "I don't want that dirty --- Kimble to get in!"

A muffled cough was heard somewhere in the crowd. It was Kimble. Jim turned and eyed him sullenly. Just in case anyone had failed to catch his sentiments on the matter, he repeated the same nicety at full strength!

Even to the most innocent of questions Jim swore vociferously. One day in 1898, William Jerome and a party of religious-minded folk had come by buggy from Tustin. They met Jim inspecting his bee hives, net over his up-turned hat, smoker in hand. The question had arisen in the party as to the distance from Tustin. Guesses ranged from 20 to 100 miles.

"I'll ask that gentleman," said one of them, referring to the beekeeper.

Jerome cringed, having heard that Jim could cuss the devil into a bottle and screw on the cap. "Avoid him," he cautioned.

But the question was asked:

"Stranger, how far is it back to Tustin?"

Jim promptly delivered a monumental series of expletives, the gist being, "Damned if it ain't about 35 miles!"



Bears roamed the Santa Anas until 1900 when the last one was killed scarcely a half mile from Smith's place. Years

earlier, Jim had built a cupola on top of his honey shed where he occasionally maintained a lookout. One time in El Toro he elaborately reported that he had seen a bear so big that he'd been afraid to shoot it. Jim was known to have shot several bears, but one way baited him by claiming the reason he had not was because "Jim couldn't hit a cow in the --- with a handful of salt!"

Jim swore splendidly for fully thirty minutes, as everyone expected him to do. Some time later (and this borders suspiciously on myth), Jim is said to have gone out and beaten a bear to death with a stick of firewood. True or not, some accepted it, though they wondered why he went to all the trouble when he could just as well have cussed it to death.



**HOLY JIM AND HIS FALLS**  
*Normally, He Avoided Water*

fire of 1906, which started at the "Forks," burned out Holy Jim Canyon. "Doc" Groover, who was managing the apiary, lost house, shed, honey tank, 35 of his 100 stands, and the site was abandoned.

Once Jim left the mountains, he seems to have disappeared from the face of the earth.



And now to the initial.

Fortunately for historians, eventually everyone ends up as a vital statistic. The name "James Smith" is not much to go on (over 50 James Smiths have died in the County since 1904), but the name

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**ALISO SCHOOL HOUSE ABOVE EL TORO**  
*Jim Was a Great Favorite With the Boys*

**HOLY JIM SMITH**  
**The Man Behind**  
**The Legend**

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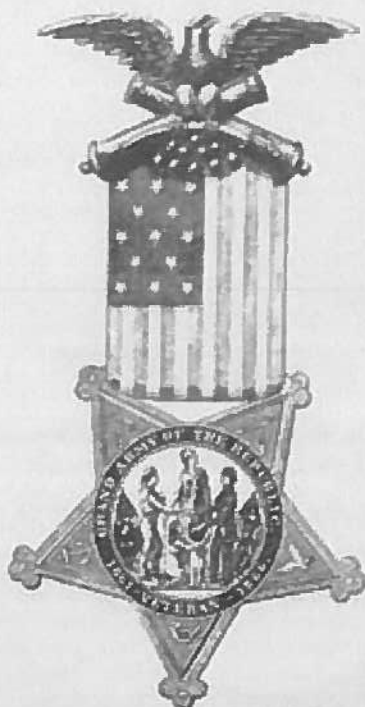
**JIM AND WIFE HATTIE**  
*Before He Went Native*

"Hat, Hattie or Harriet" is appreciably rarer. A record search revealed that one *Hattie E. Smith* had died in 1922, and left a bereaved husband, one *James T. Smith*, of 1130 W. Fifth Street, Santa Ana.

The coincidence was too great to ignore. Checking out *James T. Smith* in the Register of Deaths and comparing this to the obits in the local press, there could be no doubt. Holy Jim had at-

tained a ripe old age - 30 of those years being spent in Santa Ana after he left the canyon.

Essentially the records disclosed; *James Thompson Smith*, the son of *James Johnson* and *Nancy Carter Smith*, was born in Calumet (now Chesterton), Porter County, Indiana, on April 7, 1841. Soon after his father returned from a three year sojourn in California in 1853, his family migrated to Iowa and located on a farm. During the Civil War, Jim



**JIM WAS A YANKEE**  
*But Always a Rebel*



**TRABUGO-HOLY JIM FORKS**  
*Miners Below, Beekeepers Above*

served in the 73rd Indiana Volunteers. Mustered out in 1868, he returned to his parents in Iowa. In 1886 he moved to Santa Ana, California, "where he has resided for the most part ever since."

His occupation was listed as "retired farmer" (location not given) at which he worked for 40 years dating from his arrival in Orange County. When *Smith* died on January 2, 1934, he was 91 years, 8 months and 27 days old. His remains were sent to Mason City, Iowa.

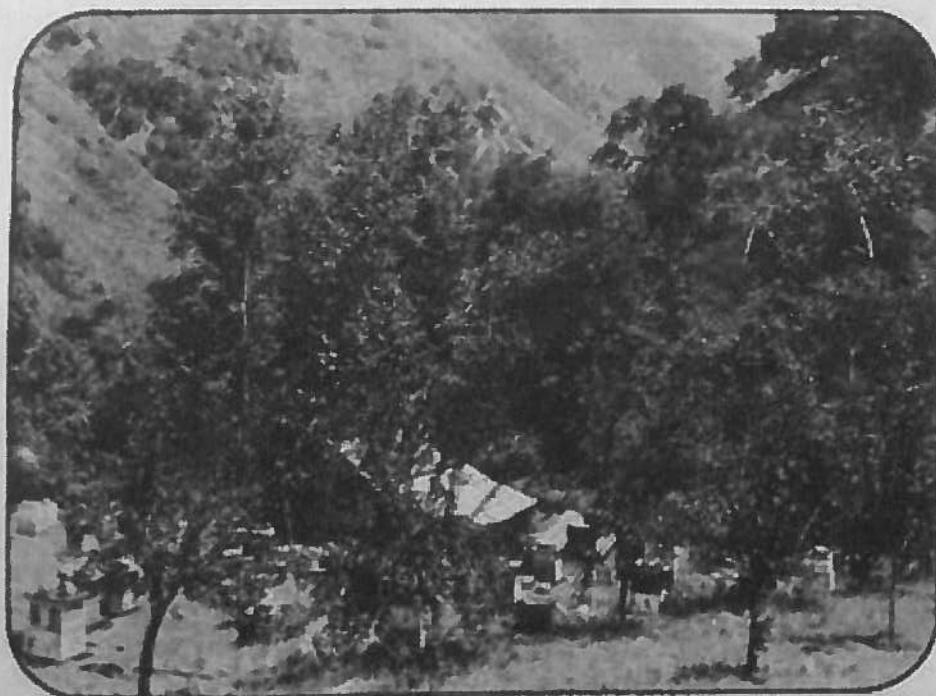


Unfortunately, his Fifth Street neighborhood, where he so long lived, offered no clues. Its residents have all been removed to make way for the County Civic Center. Probably they never knew him as Holy Jim, anyway.

Did no one, then, remember *Jim Smith* outside of the hills?

"Why, sure," a retired Sheriff's Office deputy told me last month. "I remember old *Jim Smith*. Funny old coot. We used to pick him up wandering around town, not knowing where he was. Every time he got lost, he'd sit down on the curb and let out a gawdawful yell until we came along and took him home. Swore quite a bit, too."

*Give me a middle initial, and I can run down Satan himself!* ★ ★ ★



**APIARY AND ORCHARD WENT UP IN SMOKE IN '08**  
*Where Jim Frequently Fought the Bruins*

